

No Happy Endings Can Be Found in *Hate*

by Madisen Fong

For decades now, activists have been trying to combat racial injustice and police brutality, and with the recent surge of support for the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd, the public's denunciation of racist police has never been so vocal. And yet, Black Americans continue to be murdered by police, such as Tony McDade, who was fatally shot a mere two days after Floyd's death.

*When facing this never-ending cycle of violence and death, I repeatedly ask myself: Why? Why does this keep happening? Why hasn't anything changed? And to my chagrin, I have never known how to answer these questions, in part because their complexity makes it challenging to know where to even start. So, when formulating my response to Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine*, which portrays police brutality in France, I challenged myself to use context as means to formulate an answer to these questions. Research was a key component in this process. I aimed to dig deeper and deeper to outline how the systems of the past created the injustices of the present. As I dug, the clearer these connections became, almost as if I was trying to figure out the schematics of a labyrinth by walking around inside of it before being handed a map. Returning to my original question, and applying the concepts I uncovered during the writing process, I realized that injustice and oppression continue to prevail because they have been woven into the fabrics of our society to such an extent that they have integrated themselves into the human condition.*

—Madisen Fong

About halfway through *La Haine* (1995), three teenage Parisian boys find themselves in a public restroom. Up to this moment, the trio has acted like archetypical adolescents: boisterous, carefree, and crudely humorous. But in this moment, in the heart of Paris, a city many viewers would recognize from films, guidebooks, or their travels, tensions that have been bubbling below the surface throughout the film, tensions born out of alienation from a society that took these boys in before carelessly throwing them out, begin to rise. These three come from the Paris banlieue, low-income suburbs that are home to many recent immigrants and their (often French-born) children. Despite having been born in France, many do not consider children of such immigrants true French citizens, and their mere existence generates regular violent altercations. A lethal example of this hatred plays out in this scene.

The camera focuses on the martyr of the group, Saïd, who is using a conveniently located telephone in the restroom to call his brother. On either side of him are the other two protagonists, Vinz and Hubert, who we see through reflections in the bathroom mirror that give the impression of a split-screen, representative of the rift between the men. Earlier that day, Vinz showed Saïd and Hubert a gun he found after the previous night's riots, a response to the fatal beating of their friend Abdel at the hands of the police. In an earlier scene, Vinz went so far as to actually point the gun at an officer while the boys were being chased. This action angered Hubert, whose boxing gym was burned down in the very riot Vinz had participated in. Soon, simmering tension turns into a heated argument as both boys unleash their frustrations. Vinz, infuriated with his friends' apparent apathy, asserts, "I'm fuckin' sick of the godamn system playing us every day like assholes! We live in rat-holes like pieces of shit and you guys do fuck-all to change things! . . . You know what, I'll tell you guys something. If Abdel dies, I'll fix the scales and I'll whack a pig. Then they'll know we don't turn the other cheek" (00:52:16-00:52:38). Hubert retorts that killing one cop will not make the rest disappear, nor would it have kept Abdel from dying. They continue this back and forth in each other's faces until they are interrupted by a stranger exiting a bathroom stall and fall silent.

La Haine (which translates to *Hate*), directed by Mathieu Kassovitz, is a black and white film chronicling about twenty hours in the life of three young men from immigrant backgrounds—one Afro-French, one Jewish, and one North African—their time split between their familiar turf of the banlieue and the unwelcoming streets of Paris. The film, aptly named, was made in conjunction with real events that occurred during the mid-1990s in France, and it addresses police brutality and social alienation frequently imposed upon residents of these banlieues. In portraying this subject, Kassovitz reveals the cyclical nature of the violence that plagues these suburbs. He focuses on the most vulnerable demographic: young men of immigrant descent whose ancestors were also victims of French colonization.

The scene illustrated above provides viewers with key insight into the cycle of brutality Kassovitz attempts to represent. Vinz and his community have clearly faced violence at the hands of the police, but it is Vinz's reflexive response to this violence that truly reinforces the pattern. He wants to "fix the scales," approaching the situation with a polarized 'us or them' mentality; however, in doing so, he resigns himself to the inevitability of the very system he is trying to break. Viewers of the film, removed from the situation, understand that Vinz's response may ultimately lead to destruction. Hubert sees this too, warning his friend with one of the most compelling lines of the film: "Si t'étais à l'école, tu saurais, la haine attire la haine. La haine attire la haine!" (00:53:08-00:53:13). This line, echoed in the title of the film, translates to "hate breeds hate." Forty years prior, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed the same view during a 1958 speech when he said, "Hate begets hate; violence begets violence" ("Struggle for Equality"). However, King also later acknowledged the feelings of helplessness in poor communities like Vinz and Hubert's, calling riots "the language of the unheard" ("September 27, 1966"). Both men observed how violence and hatred ravaged their communities, and both men knew that matching the cruelty would only perpetuate the deadly cycle.

By the end of the film, in the sobering light of the morning, Vinz heeds Hubert's advice and gives him the gun as a symbolic gesture of his refusal to continue playing into the system. But it

is too late for Vinz: a mere thirty seconds after the boys part ways, Vinz and Saïd are stopped by an officer with whom they'd had a confrontation earlier that day. The cocky, power-hungry officer slips his finger on the trigger and we are forced to watch as Vinz's limp body falls to the ground in front of his two best friends. Now, we hear nothing but a ticking clock. Hubert raises his gun and the officer does the same. The camera zooms in on Saïd's grief-stricken face: the final shot. He squeezes his eyes shut, and another shot rings through our ears.

As heart-wrenching as this final scene is, it also feels inevitable. Kassovitz once revealed in an interview, "I knew the ending before I knew the storyline. Everything is about the end, the last five seconds" (Vincendeau 44). A ticking clock that marks the progression of the film now imitates a time bomb waiting to explode. The ticking of the clock coupled with the masterful way Kassovitz incrementally increases the tension in a stepwise progression tells us that Vinz's death, while tragic, is the period at the end of a sentence that has already been written.

This notion of inevitability and fate has its roots in *hamartia*, an Aristotelian term traditionally referring to the fatal flaw of a protagonist that leads to their downfall. However, the *Oxford Companion to Theater Performance* also states that "The traditional debate about *hamartia* as moral flaw or intellectual error makes it an attribute of character, but it is equally possible to see it as part of the plot, an action rather than a character flaw" (Vince). So, the *hamartia* that led to Vinz's death could have sprung from within him—his pride, his anger, or his aggression—but it could have equally been the result of his environment and the greater "plot" of society rather than the flaw of the individual. To some, Kassovitz included, this latter interpretation is more logical. Vinz's death was too predictable, too sadly familiar, for the *hamartia* to lie solely within this individual. This particular *hamartia*, then, must be the result of a greater system at play. The aim of Kassovitz's film, then, is to reveal the larger cultural framework that allows such a cycle to perpetuate.

The origin of the particular framework at the core of the violence depicted in *La Haine* can be traced back to the late sixteenth century, during the colonial era. Political scientist Erik Bleich explores this period and its aftermath in his journal article "The Legacies of History? Colonization and Immigrant Integration in Britain and France." Like other imperial empires, Bleich argues, France "established a host of administrative institutions and enacted a wide range of policies to facilitate rule beyond their border" (Bleich 171). Their span of control was vast, but it did not last. After World War II, citizens of former colonies were granted French citizenship as a part of the treaty agreements, and France experienced an influx of migrants. The French government was consequently tasked with creating postcolonial integration policies that were tainted with the remnants of imperialist colonial attitudes. France's integration model is assimilationist, meaning the French government aims to turn immigrants into bona fide French "citoyens"—a notion of integrated citizenship first outlined during the French Revolution—rather than acknowledge their respective socio-cultural practices (172). Bleich further observes that the French government was so adamant in its resistance to multiculturalism that "Until 1981, France even restricted the rights of migrants to organize collectively, hindering ethnic identities and actions" (178). In turn, Bleich points out that "The government's recent banning of Islamic headscarves in public schools appears to be further evidence of a widespread preference for assimilation over multicultural recognition of ethnic differences" (178). This

suppression of “ethnic identities and actions” is demonstrably unrealistic: no one can merely cast away their heritage and cultural values and adopt new beliefs on a whim. And, for better or for worse, many immigrants, particularly after World War II, did not, and found themselves isolated in banlieues not unlike those represented in Kassovitz’s film.

Upon refusal to conform, many members of these immigrant groups became socially alienated from the rest of the population, essentially rejected from the society that had just recently demanded their participation. This alienation reveals a phenomenon the French call *fracture sociale* or social fracture, which one film reviewer describes as “the yawning socio-economic rift that has increasingly developed in France between those who have and those who have not, which all too frequently means those who belong to and practice the dominant culture and those who do not” (West 76). Kassovitz depicts this rift in multiple scenes, one of which is an aerial shot where the audience is flown over the sprawling labyrinth of buildings that make up the banlieue. This perspective provides a unique view of the scale of the complex as well as its stark differences from the elegant Gothic architecture found in the streets of Paris just a few miles away. Offering historical context for the Paris banlieues in his biography of Kassovitz and his body of work, writer Will Higbee also describes how “the uniformity of the tower blocks and banks of low-rise housing fostered a profound sense of alienation in residents” (51). Paris markets itself as the capital of romance, rarified arts, and fine dining, but this front of luxury hides a reality of inequality, imperialism, and marginalization in the banlieues, a side of France rarely seen by tourists or in films. In *La Haine*, Vinz, Saïd, Hubert, and their respective immigrant communities, unwilling or unable to conform to the ideals of full French citizens are kept segregated from the rest of the population (Bleich 172).

The trio ends up spending half of their time in the glittering capital that is Paris. There, the Parisians treat them as foreigners despite living only twenty minutes away, speaking the same language, and belonging to the same nationality. Every encounter seems to end in violent disputes; for example, they stumble into the opening of a gallery only to be shoved out a couple minutes later, or they are “randomly” stopped, arrested, and even tortured by police officers. As Higbee states, “The ability to enter the hegemonic space of the centre by riding in on [public transport] does not . . . foster a greater sense of social integration for the trio. Rather . . . it merely serves to emphasize the vast difference (as much cultural as socio-economic) that separates the inhabitants of the *cité* and the more affluent areas of Paris, despite geographical proximity” (74). Despite their proximity to Paris and their literal French citizenship, many Parisians will refuse to see the boys (and the marginalized communities they represent) as true French citizens. Although their parents immigrated from different countries, the three boys share outsider status; there is a gulf between the people of the banlieue and the institutions meant to serve them from which grows a cycle of violence and anger.

Vinz, Saïd, and Hubert appear to distrust France as much as France distrusts them, and a society built on mutual suspicion will not survive. In one of his speeches from the same year the film was released, newly elected French President Jacques Chirac said, “In the impoverished suburbs there is a weak terror. When too many young people see only unemployment or small jobs after incomplete studies, they end up revolting. For the time being, the State is trying to maintain order, and the social treatment of unemployment has not yet reached its worst point. But when

will it?” (“C’est l’emploi”). His jarring question reflects the fear, uncertainty, and fragility of a society built on hate. *La Haine* may have only captured twenty hours, but it can be understood as a window into a system. Without attempts to mend the social rifts depicted in the film, France’s submission to hatred may be as pre-determined as Vinz’s death—a hamartia centuries in the making. This conclusion is bleak, but so are the lives of the marginalized immigrants in the banlieues of Paris, and Kassovitz wants to confront us with this reality rather than ignore it any longer. In the last seconds of the film, we hear two sounds as we watch Saïd’s terrified face while Hubert and the officer stare down the barrel of each other’s guns. First, there are the now-familiar sharp metronomic ticks of the clock, representative of a bomb on the brink of explosion, growing louder as death inches nearer. Then, we hear one final voiceover from Hubert: “This is a story about a society that is falling and during its fall, to reassure itself, it repeats: So far so good. So far so good. So far so good. The importance is not in the fall, it’s in the landing” (01:36:49-01:37:11). The final punctuating gunshot marks the third senseless death of a young man from the banlieue within twenty-four hours. If the importance is “in the landing,” this ending begs the question: have we already crashed?

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